



All staff handout

3. MAPPING TRIGGERS AND OPPORTUNITIES ACTIVITY

Trauma-sensitive schools work to identify and reduce potential triggers (i.e., trauma reminders) in the school environment. Although no school can identify and eliminate all possible trauma-related triggers for students or parents, trauma-sensitive schools focus on aspects of the environment that they can control and then work to reduce potentially triggering situations. This activity will help you to identify potential trauma triggers in your school environment as well as opportunities for reducing and eliminating potentially triggering practices.

Overview of Triggers

Triggers are reminders of past traumatic experiences that cause the body to react automatically as if the traumatic event were happening again. Specific to the individual, trauma reminders can be as subtle as odors or as obvious as a repeat incident. Some potentially triggering experiences for trauma survivors include situations or experiences that could be difficult for any student to manage (e.g., chaotic environments, threatening gestures). But a person who is triggered feels overwhelmed and appears to overreact to the situation from the standpoint of a person unaffected by trauma. Potential triggers for persons with histories of trauma include the following:

- Loud, chaotic environments
- Odors
- Physical touch
- Confinement
- Uncertainty about expectations
- Change in routine
- Situations involving authority figures and limit setting, even appropriate limits
- Hand or body gestures that appear threatening
- Witnessing violence between other individuals, such as peers fighting
- Areas of the school experienced as unsafe, such as bathrooms or less well-monitored areas
- Emergency vehicles and police or fire personnel
- Feelings such as anger, sadness, or fear in response to common school conflicts—getting in trouble, doing poorly on a test, having an argument with another student (Such feelings may trigger an intense reaction related to past trauma.)

Triggers set off intense reactions that can be confusing and easily misunderstood or mislabeled, particularly if the school staff does not understand the connection between current behavior and previous trauma. Triggered students can display a variety of fight, flight, or freeze responses.

| Survival Response | Related Behaviors |
|-------------------|--|
| Fight | Verbal attacks, aggression, assaultive behavior, defiance, aggressive stance, clenched fists and teeth |
| Flight | Running away, refusing to talk, avoidance, hiding, substance use |
| Freeze | Appearing nonresponsive, numbed out, unable to interact, or disconnected |

Triggers for Parents

Parents who are affected by trauma may have their own triggers related to their experiences. Some types of interactions between parents and the school staff present an elevated potential for triggering, particularly interactions that leave parents feeling helpless, vulnerable, or out of control or that mimic other aspects of past traumatic experiences. Potential trauma triggers for parents arise from situations involving conflict:

- Feeling disrespected by the school staff
- Being called into a meeting to address their child's behaviors
- Uncertainty about what is happening
- Lack of control over decisions being made about their child
- History of negative experiences with the education system

Responses to trauma triggers that you may encounter from parents include extreme anger, defensiveness, avoidance, or shutting down. These behaviors are challenging and can be easily misunderstood by staff, leading to negative interactions that interfere with parent engagement and relationship building.

Mapping Triggers and Opportunities Activity

Recognizing potentially triggering experiences for students helps school staff in identifying opportunities for reducing trauma triggers and trauma-related responses.

1. Mark it on the map.

Review the coded list of potential trauma triggers for students and parents. Determine where in your school building these triggers are likely to occur, and insert the associated code on the school map (following page). For example, writing P3 on the administrator's office indicates that participating in large meetings has a potential for triggering a vulnerable parent. Some triggers are likely to occur in multiple places, so you might write S1 on hallways, gym, and cafeteria for the trigger potential of loud, chaotic environments.

| Student Triggers | Parent Triggers |
|---|---|
| S1. Loud, chaotic environments | P1. Being called into school to discuss a problem |
| S2. Physical touch | P2. Being treated disrespectfully when you arrive at the school |
| S3. Uncertainty about expectations | P3. Participating in large meetings with a lot of school staff |
| S4. Changes in routine | P4. Not being part of decision making for your child |
| S5. Witnessing violence between peers, such as fighting | P5. Lack of privacy in where school staff members are talking to you about a private matter |
| S6. Meeting with an adult to address behavior | P6. Participating in an assessment process related to your child |
| S7. Emergency vehicles, police or fire personnel | P7. Confusion and lack of clarity about your child's education |
| S8. Being called out on your behaviors in front of others | |
| S9. Being harassed or intimidated by others | |
| S10. Being asked to discuss difficult topics | |
| S11. Feeling embarrassed or ashamed | |



2. Provide alternatives.

In the following two tables, list alternatives for eliminating or reducing potential trauma-related triggers for students and then do the same for parents.

Student examples—*You may reduce the trigger potential of S8 by making a practice of confronting student behavior out of the public eye. Strategically placing adult support during drills can reduce the trigger potential of S7.*

| Student Triggers | Alternatives |
|---|--------------|
| S1. Loud, chaotic environments | |
| S2. Physical touch | |
| S3. Uncertainty about expectations | |
| S4. Changes in routine | |
| S5. Witnessing violence between peers, such as fighting | |
| S6. Meeting with an adult to address behavior | |
| S7. Emergency vehicles, police or fire personnel | |
| S8. Being called out on your behaviors in front of others | |
| S9. Being harassed or intimidated by others | |
| S10. Being asked to discuss difficult topics | |
| S11. Feeling embarrassed or ashamed | |

Parent examples—A way to reduce the trigger potential of P1 is to give parents as much control as possible over the agenda for a meeting. Also, you can eliminate the trigger potential of P5 by ensuring that you always talk about confidential issues in a private space.

| Parent Triggers | Alternatives |
|---|--------------|
| P1. Being called into school to discuss a problem | |
| P2. Being treated disrespectfully when you arrive at the school | |
| P3. Participating in large meetings with a lot of school staff | |
| P4. Not being part of decision making for your child | |
| P5. Lack of privacy in where school staff members are talking to you about a private matter | |
| P6. Participating in an assessment process related to your child | |
| P7. Confusion and lack of clarity about your child's education | |